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Testimony Re: Governor's FY 2022, FY 2021—Revised and Capital Budgets, Department of Children, Youth and Families and Office of the Child Advocate

House Finance Committee

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Elizabeth Burke Bryant, Executive Director

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide this testimony. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT would like to voice its support for elements of the Governor's FY 2022 Budgets for both the Department of Children, Youth and Families and the Office of the Child Advocate. These two departments provide critical supports to the most vulnerable children and families in our state, and especially during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, it is important that they are adequately funded and staffed to ensure that families are supported and children are safe.

Within the Governor's FY 2022 budget for the **Department of Children, Youth and Families (DCYF)**, Rhode Island KIDS COUNT strongly supports the following provisions:

- Increased investments in recruiting, training, licensing, and supporting foster families which will provide \$2.5 million in general revenue savings from shifting youth from more costly out-of-home placements into foster care, where appropriate. Except in cases where time-limited residential therapeutic treatment is required, research has shown that children in foster families experience better outcomes related to placement stability, education, and delinquency compared to children in congregate care settings.
- \$40,783 for the Extreme Family Finding initiative to support DCYF in identifying permanent living situations for children and youth who DCYF has struggled to place
- \$400,000 in general revenue funds to ensure compliance with new federal requirements in the *Family First Prevention Services Act*.
- \$500,000 in general revenue funds to provide continued supports and services to older youth in foster care who would have aged out during the pandemic. These funds will support identifying, locating, and re-enrolling youth who turned 21 during 2020. This will ensure compliance with requirements in the *Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021*. Older youth who age out of foster care are at risk for low educational attainment, homelessness, unemployment, and unintended pregnancy. Extending foster care to age 21 helps youth in foster care transition to independent living with better outcomes into adulthood. This support is particularly important now because during the COVID-19 pandemic, youth in extended foster care are navigating the transition to adulthood with record unemployment, housing instability, and educational disruption.

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- \$200,000 in general revenue funds for the DCYF Higher Education Opportunity Incentive Fund, which helps former foster children attend postsecondary educational institutions in Rhode Island.
- Consolidation of one module at the Rhode Island Training School and elimination of 9.0 FTEs (\$900,000 general revenue savings) to bring the facility and staffing into alignment with the reduced population of youth at the Training School.
- \$3.5 million, including \$1.0 million from general revenues, for a Female Youth Facility to offer psychiatric residential treatment facilities for female youth with complex mental and behavioral health needs currently being served in out-of-state facilities, the Training School, and hospitals.

Consistent with our previous testimony, Rhode Island KIDS COUNT also strongly supports two budget articles that will support DCYF and the Office of the Child Advocate in supporting children in the care of DCYF. We support Article 4, which recommends borrowing \$17.0 million to replace DCYF's child welfare data system, RICHIST, which has been in place since 1997. We also strongly support the sections of Article 13 that recommend statutory changes that would offer eligibility for a parole hearing after 10 years of incarceration to young adults who received lengthy sentences (not including life without parole) for crimes committed before age 22. These changes would result in \$17,268 in savings.